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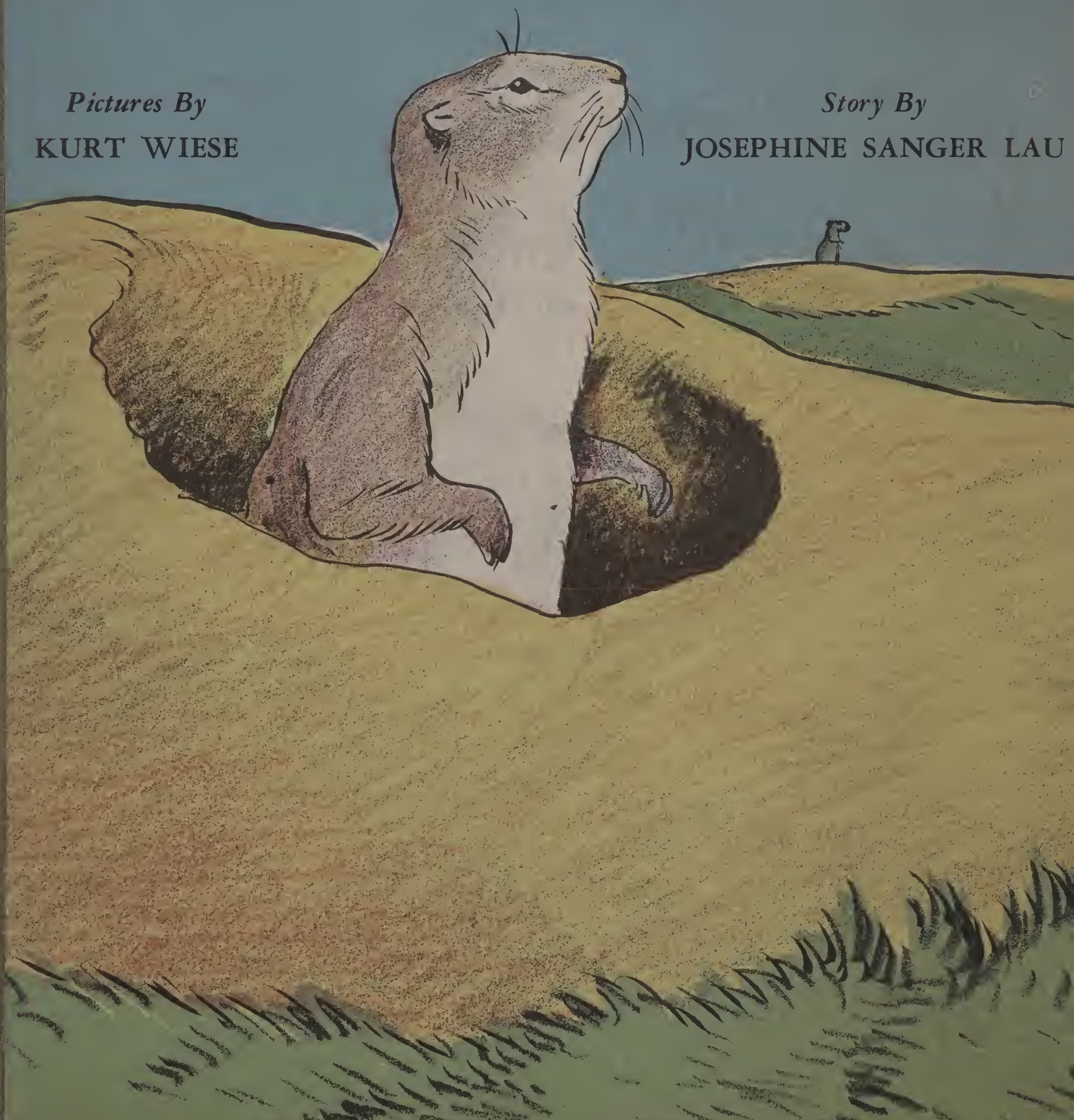
Cheeky

A PRAIRIE DOG

Pictures By
KURT WIESE

Story By
JOSEPHINE SANGER LAU



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A PRAIRIE DOG

By

JOSEPHINE SANGER LAU

PICTURES BY

KURT WIESE

JUNIOR PRESS BOOKS

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CHAPTER ONE

CHEEKY stirred in his nest of dried grass. It was early in the spring, earlier than usual for baby prairie dogs, and Cheeky was cold. Though the snug little nest was several feet under ground, the air that reached it was chilled by the breath of snow, still lying on the mountain peaks to the north.

Cheeky pulled his legs up under him and curled his stumpy brown tail about him as far as it would go, but still he shivered. Finally he roused himself, pushed in between his sisters and reached his mother's side. A sip of warm milk comforted him and he went to sleep again to dream of the doings in his dark little cave nest; the squirmings and squeakings of two baby sisters, the fragrance of clean dry grass, and best of all, his mother's warm kind presence.

Early in the morning, Mother slipped away. She was very hungry for she had three husky youngsters to feed in addition to herself.

"Keep very quiet," she crooned as she crept to the door.

Cheeky stretched and yawned. Only the faintest glimmer of light came down the long tunnel to the nest, but Cheeky couldn't see even that for his eyes were still closed. Mother was gone but the warmth of her body still lingered and he crept into the place she had just vacated, for another nap. Since there was nothing to eat, one might as well sleep.

In a short time, an unusually short time, in fact, Mother returned. Cheeky could hear her scrambling down the steep little tunnel. She was scolding loudly.

"Go away," she chattered, "go and hide in your own burrow! Don't push yourself in where you're not wanted!"

The three babies were awake in an instant. There was a strange odor—a strange, thick odor of feathers that caused them to shrink back against the earthen wall of the nest and wait without a sound.

Cheeky didn't know why they did it, didn't know why he was afraid. Nobody had ever told him that odor meant danger. It was just one of the things he knew because all of his ancestors had known it, ever since the beginning of things.

There was the sound of a scuffle just outside the door of the nest. The strange odor was stronger, more terrifying. A sharp bark from Mother, an angry hiss, then all was quiet as Mother backed into the nest.

She was breathing hard. "Impudent Owl," she chattered, "thinks he can hide in our burrow every time Hungry Hawk soars overhead!"

She nuzzled the three babies as if to count them. "Thinks he can find a room here instead of taking the trouble to go to his own home!"

"Impudent Owl," she chattered

She sniffed at the door of the nest. "And I have no doubt he has done worse than that! I was sure there were four of you to begin with—I couldn't have miscounted. I have no doubt he has taken free board as well as a room, when I was not around."

She continued to scold as she washed her family and hunted through the grass for any bit of trash or waste. "He's back there in the end of the tunnel, just where I want to put my sweepings. How can a body keep the house clean with such a worrisome roomer about? He has probably settled down for a long nap! And I hadn't half finished my breakfast!"

One day Cheeky opened his eyes, just a very little. At first he was conscious of only the faintest sensation of light. He turned toward it, moving his head from side to side. His sisters, he noticed, were doing the same. From day to day, the openings in their eyes grew larger until at last they were round and bright. Immediately Cheeky became restless.

"Don't leave the nest," Mother warned. "The world is still cold, much too cold for baby prairie dogs."

Cheeky tumbled away from her pushing nose. He would, he knew, lose no time in getting into the light. Already his fat little body was shaping itself, his legs growing more steady. One day he slipped away. His sisters were sleeping quietly.

"I'll just run along the hall," he thought, "just a little way, to see where the light comes from."

For three or four feet, the hall was level. It was a long journey for a baby prairie dog who had just learned to use his legs. He wobbled and bumped his fat little body against

the wall of the narrow tunnel. At last he came to a turn and the hall sloped sharply upward.

Cheeky blinked and sniffed as he stood at the foot of the incline. The air was clean and cold, and the steep passageway was lighter than the hall behind him. Suddenly a bit of loose earth came tumbling down and rolled almost to his feet. It was a sound he had never heard before.

He turned with a clumsy flop, kicking against the wall in his panic, and scrambled back down the hall. In his haste he passed the door of the nest and ran on blindly until at last he bumped his nose against the end of the tunnel where Mother always stored her sweepings. The odor of Sleepy Owl still lingered and he turned again in terror. At last he tumbled into the nest and cuddled down between his sleeping sisters.

"I'll never leave the nest again," he chattered to himself, "danger is in the light."

Cheeky's memory was short. The very next day he was out and running along the dimly lighted hall. This time his legs were a bit steadier. His sisters came, too, and they tumbled and romped with greater freedom than they had found in the nest. Each day they ventured a little higher, a little closer to the world.

It was Cheeky, of course, who first poked his inquisitive little nose out of the door, then clambered to the top of the crater-like mound that surrounded it.

The world was filled with strange smells and sounds—the sharp fragrance of sage and the pleasing odor of clean, washed earth. A meadow lark trilled from the top of a fence post near by.

Mother was nibbling sage brush tips close at hand. She caught sight of Cheeky.

"Stop," she barked, and the little fellow turned to stone. He sat up on his hind legs precisely as she was doing, and braced himself against his stumpy little tail. He looked up. High in the blue, blue sky circled a black speck. Nearer and nearer it came until it hovered directly above his head.

"Skip, skip, skip," commanded Mother.

Cheeky lost no time in tumbling back into the doorway. Down he went, bumping and rolling, until at last he fell over his sisters at the foot of the steep tunnel.

Mother followed.

"What was it?" Cheeky gasped as he crowded close to her.

"Hungry Hawk," was the answer. "You must never venture far from your own front door when he is in sight."

Outside Cheeky could hear other prairie dogs barking sharply; then suddenly, as if the earth had swallowed them, every voice was stilled.

"What has happened?" Cheeky asked next.

"Hungry Hawk was looking for a tender young prairie dog. His nest is in the rocks, high up on the mountainside. He probably has babies to feed. He would have been very glad to catch you outside."

Cheeky shivered. The world wasn't entirely a place of pleasant smells and sounds. Danger was there, too. It hovered in the beautiful blue sky above him. With that knowledge, Cheeky's babyhood definitely ended.

CHAPTER TWO

It was not in Cheeky's nature to worry. When he awoke from a short nap to find Mother gone, he immediately started back up the tunnel. A short distance from the top, was a small nest, or anteroom, dug out of the earth. Here Cheeky stopped to listen before he ventured into the light again.

Mother was sitting in the shade of a clump of soapweed. Its long, slim, needle-pointed spires protected her without obstructing her view of the sky above.

"Come here," she called as Cheeky's bright brown eyes peeped cautiously over the edge of his front porch.

When he reached her side, she plucked a blade of the curly gray buffalo grass that grew in patches all about her. "Try a bit of this."

Cheeky sat up, precisely as she was doing, and ate the grass from his soft little paws. It wasn't bad at all. It was juicy and tender and reminded him of the warm sweet milk that had been his only food heretofore. Besides, it was fun to be moving his jaws and the businesslike crunching of his sharp little teeth sounded pleasantly in his own ears.

He looked all about as he ate. The village was a cluster of mounds, like the one around his own front door. On all sides were other little creatures very much like Mother. They all wore faded tawny brown fur coats, very much the color of the adobe soil in which they lived, with darker shadings on their heads, especially above their eyes. The tip of each tail was decorated with black.

Far to the east, a high wire fence extended from north to south. Beyond that lay a field of brightest green. To the north, the Old Pasture ended in a dense thicket of mesquite and greasewood. Rocky Hill lay to the west, its barren sides dotted with sage and cactus and gravel mounds made by the big red ants.

Everywhere prairie dogs chattered and barked, running about from one burrow to another. Cheeky was fascinated. He found it hard to pay attention to what Mother was saying.

"Remember," she told him, "that Hungry Hawk has a far-reaching eye; but it is impossible for him to see you if you are perfectly still. He will think you a bit of greasewood stump or sage brush. If you are close to home, run. If you are far away, sit still and wait for him to leave."

Cheeky promised to remember, then his mind returned to the world about him.

"Mother," he asked, when he had lost interest in the

business of eating, "who is the big prairie dog that sits on his front porch and watches in every direction?"

"That is Wish-ton-Wish," Mother replied. "He is mayor of Dog Town because he is wise and strong." She looked proudly at her son. "Perhaps some day you will be mayor, for you too are very strong. If only danger does not catch up with you before you learn wisdom!" She sighed. "You are very like your father."

Cheeky had reason to remember that remark. One day, when the wind was blowing from the east, a most delightful odor tickled his nose.

"What is it?" he asked as he lifted his head and sniffed.

"Alfalfa," Mother told him. "It is far away in the field beyond the fence, much too far for you to go. Besides, it belongs to the man."

That should have been enough, but Cheeky just couldn't get away from that smell. He blinked longingly every time he looked at that faraway field of green. Mother was always sending him home, as if he were a baby. Sometimes he was sent home for no better reason than that Turkey Buzzard was soaring overhead. Everybody knew that Turkey Buzzard never caught anything. He just ate what somebody else had killed and left lying on the prairie. Mother was too timid. He would go a little way and if he saw anything to be afraid of, he could come home.

He looked all around. His mother and sisters were frolicking under some sage brush nearby. Even Wish-ton-Wish was gossiping with his neighbors. There wasn't a speck in the sky; not a twig stirred in the mesquite. There was nothing to keep a venturesome young prairie dog at home.

He loped away, much like a rabbit, then sat up on his hind legs to look about him. Again he ran and again he looked. The green field was much closer, when his attention was attracted by a curious-looking object lying in the sun on a low flat rock. For a moment, he sat up and watched without moving a muscle; then he got down on his four feet and crept closer.

"Strange," he chattered, "it looks just like a bit of twisted wood, gray and spotted! But why should it be lying on that rock? It can't be danger, for Mother has never warned me against things that lie in plain sight in the sunshine. I'll just have to investigate."

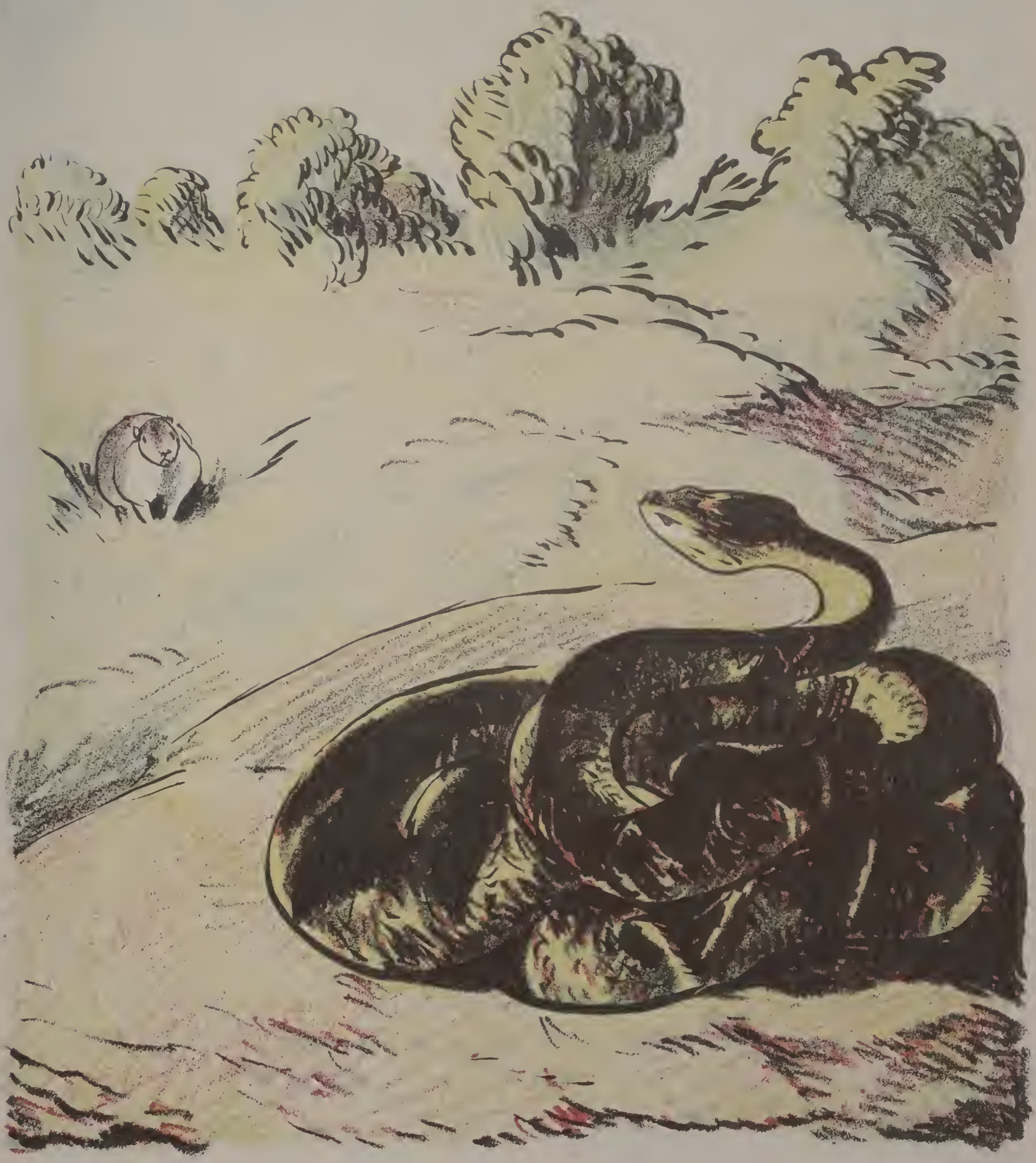
Investigating was one thing that Cheeky loved to do. Besides, the wind had stopped blowing and the odor of alfalfa no longer tickled his nose.

Nearer and nearer he came. Suddenly, from the center of the strange coiled thing, came a queer rattling noise and Cheeky leaped back. He sat up and waited a long time. Nothing happened. Again he ventured closer. It was such a curious thing—must be a stick. And yet, there was that queer rattling noise. Perhaps the wind stirred a dry leaf.

He was just stretching his neck to get a closer look, when suddenly a head lifted—an ugly flat head, with black wicked eyes. A forked tongue darted toward him. The neck began to swell and puff while a sharper skirring, like the crackle of fire in tumbleweeds, came from the middle of the coil.

For one awful instant, Cheeky stared into those cold black eyes, too terrified to move.

"Skip," shouted Mother behind him. "Don't look. Skip, skip, skip!"



Suddenly a head lifted—an ugly, flat head

Cheeky was so startled that he managed to do as he was told. He turned with a flip and his fat little legs moved with surprising speed as he followed Mother back to the village, never stopping until he had tumbled into his own front door.

"What was it?" he whispered as Mother scolded and petted him. He was shivering as if he were cold. Mother too was trembling.

"A strange creature that is hated by every living thing. He hears with his tongue and speaks with his tail but death is in his teeth. His name is Rattlesnake. He is still sluggish from his long winter's sleep, else he would surely have caught you. Do not go so far again. If you do, danger will surely find you." She sighed. "You are so like your father."

Cheeky thought for a moment. "Mother, where is my father?" he asked.

Mother waggled her short furry ears. "Who can tell? He went to the alfalfa field on the other side of the fence. El Coyote lives in the mesquite. He is a slinking gray thief and he lies in wait for prairie dogs who wander away from the watchful eye of Wish-ton-Wish.

"Now let us go outside. Eat your buffalo grass. Do not turn your eyes so often toward the alfalfa field. Remember, danger is waiting on the way."

Cheeky longed to ask many more questions but Mother hopped away to talk with a neighbor, and he decided to join a game of hide-and-seek around the sage brush in the middle of the village.

Rattlesnake, however, was not to be so easily forgotten. On the following morning, Cheeky's attention was attracted

by the sudden hush that fell upon the village. He ran to his front porch and sat up to look. Rattlesnake was coming! Coming to the village! His long scaly body writhed from side to side as smoothly as running water. His head was lifted slightly as he advanced, slowly, surely.

Every prairie dog sat as if turned to stone. Even the voice of Wish-ton-Wish was silent. Cheeky longed to hide but he did not think of entering his own front door. That was one of the things he knew he should not do—knew it because his grandfathers had learned it way back in the beginning of time.

Cheeky's bones seemed to melt as he met the stare of those cold black eyes again and heard the rustling of that long whip-like body as it made its way over the rough ground. Rattlesnake came at last to a mound in the middle of the village. Without an instant's hesitation, he lifted himself to the top of the little front porch and disappeared into the hole.

Cheeky was seized again with that strange fit of trembling. He didn't know—he never would know—he could only hope that nobody was at home in that burrow.

CHAPTER THREE

The days grew warmer. Mother changed her heavy tan winter coat for a darker summer fur. It was of coarse brown hair, with lighter tan fur underneath. It wasn't beautiful, but it was cool and comfortable.

Cheeky grew strong and active on a diet of buffalo grass and sage brush tips. Indeed, he ate so much that the patches of buffalo grass around his home grew few and scanty. There was plenty of grama grass if one were really hungry, but it was tough and coarse. Once Cheeky was tempted by the bright green of the broad-leafed cactus. But it pricked his nose dreadfully, and the burn remained so long that he never tried again.

He became a very sociable little animal. It was pleasant to visit among his neighbors, with Wish-ton-Wish perched on top of his front porch to warn them of danger. Sometimes Cheeky quarreled with other young dogs, but never for long. It was too hard to remember what the quarrel was about.

It was pleasant to visit among his neighbors

He never missed an opportunity to scold Sleepy, the little burrowing owl, who loved to sit in the sun with his eyes closed, his head drawn back against his shoulders. Sleepy didn't see very well in the daytime, and at the first alarm he would slip into the nearest burrow. Cheeky was very angry when it happened to be his home into which Sleepy dropped uninvited. However, it was some satisfaction to scold. He felt fairly safe, too, as long as he didn't come too close to that sharp, hooked beak.

One evening, just as the sun was going down behind Rocky Hill, El Coyote trotted through the village on his way to the mesquite thicket. Wish-ton-Wish gave the alarm. It was the signal for every prairie dog to run to his own front porch; there, in perfect safety, to give voice to the age-old hatred of the hunted for the hunter.

"You robber, you slinking gray thief," Cheeky shouted till his whole body shook, "you eater of harmless creatures!"

The prairie dog teetered on the edge of his front porch. His enemy was very near.

As Cheeky continued to shout, suddenly El Coyote stopped, turned, sat down, and yawned right in his face!

It was too much. Cheeky's anger died in a smother of fear. He plunged through the doorway and scurried down the steep tunnel to the nest of his babyhood. There he slept, cuddled against Mother. And he dreamed of cruel yellow eyes, gaping jaws, and gleaming white teeth.

Occasionally great creatures with switching tails and slowly bobbing heads trampled across the village. Somehow, Cheeky knew he had nothing to fear from them, though they were many times larger than El Coyote and had great horns growing out of their heads. He always sat

on his front porch and scolded at the top of his voice when they came near, though they paid him not the slightest attention.

One day he saw the man, walking behind the cattle. He was driving them toward the alfalfa field.

Cheeky was quite a distance from home, but he knew the cattle were harmless so long as he kept out of reach of their swinging heads. The man, too, moved slowly, so the prairie dog shouted, "Go away! Stay on your own side of the fence!"

Nobody even looked at him and he shouted again, jerking his short little tail at every bark. "Go away! Don't walk through my village!"

Suddenly a booming voice answered his challenge and from behind the man darted a great shabby creature, the like of which Cheeky had never seen before. And he didn't stop to look now! Without another "cheek-chuck," he darted toward home. The great beast followed, barking at every leap, taking more ground in one jump than Cheeky could cover in ten.

That full-throated bark gave wings to the prairie dog's feet. Once he darted around a big cactus patch and his pursuer stopped for a moment to sniff.

Home was just ahead, the beast right at his heels. Mother sat on the front porch, "cheek-chucking" as loudly as ever she could. So was Wish-ton-Wish and every other prairie dog in the village and what a racket it made, with the creature behind him barking loudest of all!

Just as he reached the porch, Mother gave one last hurried "cheek-chuck" and flipped over out of sight. Cheeky followed in a flurry of dust and flying heels. Down he went,

clear to the end of the incline, where he lay gasping for breath. When he lifted his head, Mother was combing her whiskers, apparently not too much concerned.

"What was it?" Cheeky asked.

"Just Ring, the dog."

"Not a prairie dog," Cheeky argued. "Why, he was larger than El Coyote!"

Mother continued to comb her whiskers. "He is no relation to us. We are not dogs, really. We are called that because we bark like them. We belong to the squirrel family. The dog chases us often, but he barks all the way and he never catches anybody. I think he is related to El Coyote but he is much more respectable than his gray, bushy-tailed cousin."

Cheeky felt somewhat ashamed of his panic. However, he knew that if ever he saw Ring again, he would say less and run sooner. He could hear the great creature now, pawing their lovely front porch to pieces, pretending he was going to dig them out of their home.

Cheeky didn't worry about that. He knew he could dig faster than any dog, for his claws and teeth were long and strong. Mother, however, clucked angrily. That crater-like mound was very necessary in case of rain. It kept the water from washing down into their home.

In a few minutes, the man whistled and Ring went away. Every prairie dog in the village came out at once to gossip and scold about his visit. Cheeky, however, had no time to talk. He was obliged to help Mother repair the front porch, placing the dirt and ramming it into a hard wall with his blunt little nose.

Cheeky followed in a flurry of dust

CHAPTER FOUR

Repairing porches was hard work and Cheeky slept late the following morning. He knew, as soon as he popped his nose out of the door, that something exciting was happening in Dog Town. The man was coming again!

Cheeky balanced himself against his stumpy brown tail shouting, "Go away! Stay on your own side of the fence!"

"Don't bother your head about something you can't help," Mother advised as she plucked blades of buffalo grass and sat up very straight to eat them. "When the man comes with his horses and turns the world upside down, prairie dogs must move."

She crept to another patch of grass. "Long before you were born, I lived in the field on the other side of the fence. After the man came with his horses and dragged the shining claw over the earth, there was a terrible flood. 'Irrigating,' he called it. We escaped just in time, for every home was filled with water. This time, we will not wait. We will move at once to Rocky Hill. We shall not have as much to eat, but there will be nothing to fear, save Hungry Hawk and El Coyote."

Cheeky was stubborn. He chattered angrily as Mother hopped away. He turned to watch the man who, strangely, had paid no attention to his challenge. Back and forth he worked.

Cheeky saw the homes of his friends overturned and filled with earth. Why, it was outrageous! Every furrow was bringing him closer to Cheeky's home in the Old Pasture where prairie dogs had built their towns more years ago than Cheeky's oldest grandfather could remember.

Perhaps the man hadn't seen him, he thought. Perhaps,

because he sat so straight and still, the man thought he was a bit of sage brush stump. If a prairie dog could fool a hawk that way, why not a man? Cheeky didn't scold any more. He sat still and watched as long as he dared.

Nearer and nearer came the horses, dragging the great shining claw behind them, bringing with them a pleasant smell of freshly turned earth. But Cheeky wasn't interested in smells. He teetered for a moment on his hind legs, gave a last defiant little bark, and did a flip-flop through his front door.

He crept down the long steep tunnel to his own little bedroom. No shining claw could reach him here, he knew. He could hear the heavy tramp of the horses coming closer and closer; then they passed him by as another furrow was ploughed. He sputtered angrily each time he heard them until at last they were directly over his head, and he knew from the rattle of loose earth that the lovely smooth mound he had worked so hard to repair was being torn to bits.

He muttered in the darkness and waited. Occasionally he slept, but always the return of the horses wakened him. Finally he got up and crept uneasily along the narrow hall. Outside the sun was shining and Cheeky dearly loved sunshine. He longed to run about among his neighbors, visiting and nibbling buffalo grass. He sighed. No doubt the whole town had moved to Rocky Hill. He almost wished he had gone, too.

At last the horses went away and didn't come back. Cheeky ventured to climb the steep little tunnel to his front door. Just as he expected, it was filled with earth.

He sat down to think. "I'll have to dig myself out. The horses have gone; perhaps they will never come back. I'll make another door and then I'll get my supper."

It didn't take long to push the crumbled earth away. In a few minutes he poked his little brown nose out of the tunnel and sneezed. It was nearly dark and he didn't like to be out late, but he must have something to eat.

He sat up and looked around the Old Pasture. Oh dear, everything was so different! Not a bit like home, and Cheeky began to have a very bad feeling deep in his heart. It wasn't hunger, exactly, but a queer, empty feeling, as if he were the only little brown prairie dog in the whole world. A loose clod of dirt slipped and he flopped back into his hole without even stopping to look around.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he told himself and he gained courage at the sound of his own voice. That was what he missed most—the sound of voices. Again he poked his nose out and looked around.

It wasn't easy to get his supper. Truly, the whole world had been turned upside down and all the grass was covered. Even the cactus and sage had been uprooted. It was an outrage—a real outrage—that a self-respecting prairie dog should be obliged to dig for his food like a common gopher!

At last, however, his stomach was filled and he hopped back to his hole. There was no longer a front porch or even a good-sized doorway. But Cheeky felt more cheerful.

"I'll build up that front porch tomorrow," he thought as he sat up and looked around.

The light was fading from the sky above Rocky Hill. Mother was there, and all the others. Even Wish-ton-Wish had not dared to stay.

"Perhaps they'll come back," he chattered to himself, "when the grass has grown again."

He pattered back to his nest and was soon fast asleep.

He sat up and looked around the Old Pasture

CHAPTER FIVE

Cheeky was lonesome. Every morning he got up at daybreak to dig for his breakfast. It took a long time, for Wish-ton-Wish was not there to warn him in case of possible danger. Cheeky had to look out for himself. It meant that he must stop work every few minutes to look around—up in the air for Hungry Hawk and behind every clod for El Coyote.

In addition, the man would come and all day long Cheeky was obliged to hide in his burrow or spend his time scolding from his new front porch. It was very tiring, and with nothing to eat all day, he began to grow thin.

Days passed—a whole week of them. As the man offered him no harm, Cheeky gradually lost his fear. He kept very still when this huge creature was near, but he managed to snatch a few bites between times.

One morning the man spoke to him. "Hi, young fellow, are you still here? I thought prairie dogs knew enough to move when they weren't wanted! Better leave before you get a wetting."

Cheeky hadn't waited to listen. He'd been unusually careless and the man had come very near. The only answer he made was a startled little "cheek-chuck" as he flipped over backward through his front door and crept down into his bedroom for a nap.

He was having a delightful dream about being up on Rocky Hill with Mother and the others. They were playing hide-and-seek among the rocks, when a queer noise made his ears twitch. They wiggled restlessly for a minute or two and all the time the noise grew louder. Suddenly he was wide awake and listening!

A queer rushing sound came to Cheeky that he had never heard before! Because he had never heard it before, he knew it meant danger. It was coming—coming as boldly as Rattlesnake—right down through his own front door!

It was a splashing gurgling sound that made him hurry into the hallway to investigate. Water! He could smell it now! But it couldn't be raining! Rain trickled slowly, just enough to make his nest comfortably cool and damp. This sound was louder than that—much louder. There was something threatening about it, and Cheeky raced for the door without even stopping to brush his whiskers.

Only a little way he went, for the water was coming toward him. He turned and started back, but by that time the water was close behind!

"Mother!" he shouted before he had time to think.

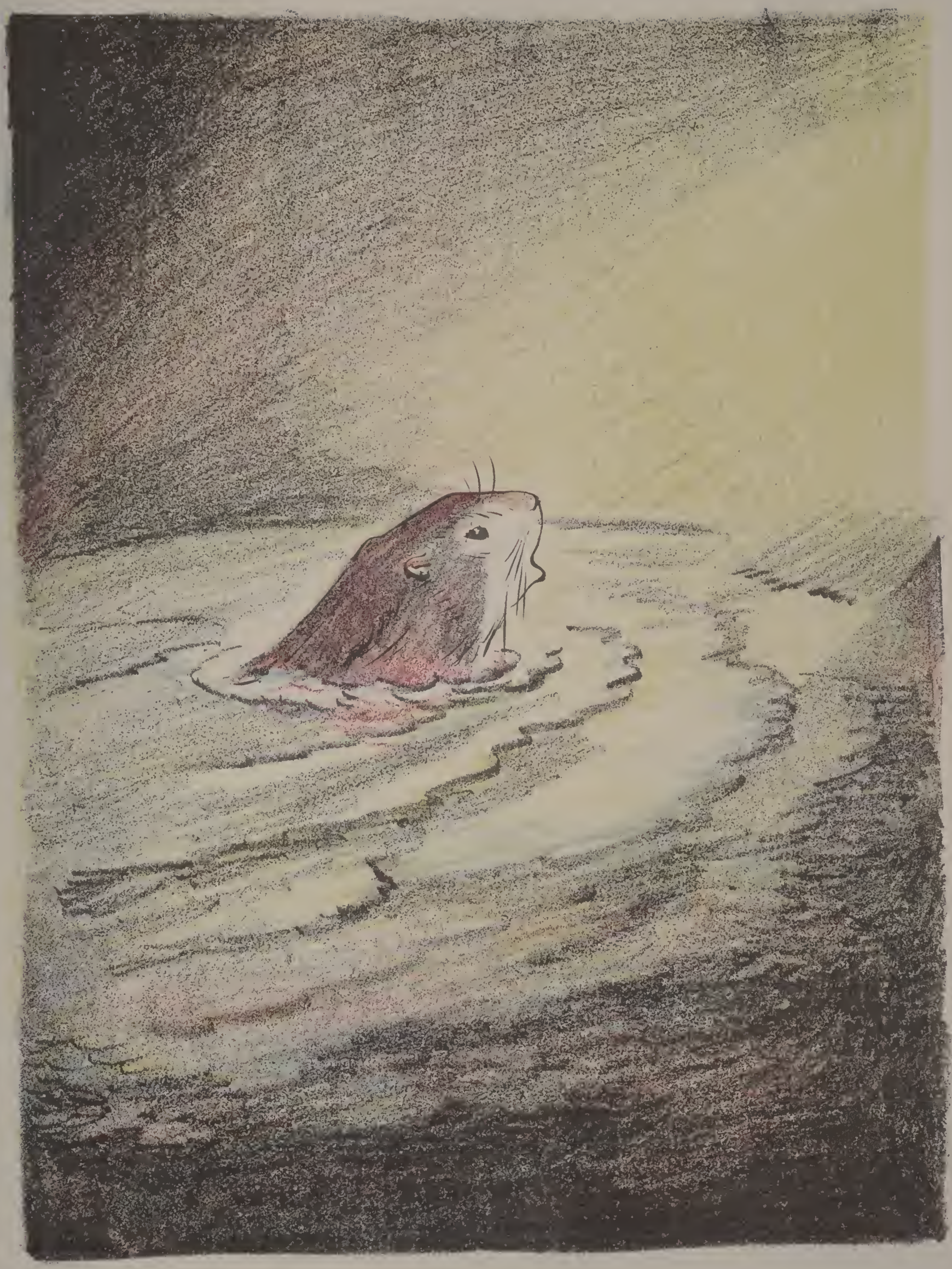
Back and forth along the hallway he dashed. "This is the worst," he panted, "the very worst thing that could possibly happen! I just know I shall get soaking wet, and I'll have to swim to get out of here!"

He shivered in panic, for Cheeky had no use for water.

He never took a drink, and as for bathing, well, it simply wasn't done in Dog Town.

For another moment he hesitated and drew his paws back from the advancing stream. But there wasn't any place to go and Cheeky drew a good deep breath, closed his eyes, and plunged in.

Br-r-r, but that water was cold! He had never known anything so disagreeable. It climbed up around his stomach, to his neck, even to the tip of his nose. It tried to drag him back but Cheeky dug his claws in hard and climbed as fast as posssible. All at once, the water came faster, until the entire hole was filled and even Cheeky's nose went under. He swam frantically, fighting hard against the rush of water. At last, he never knew why, it stopped pulling at him and he managed to reach the top!



He swam frantically

He gasped and panted and sputtered. It seemed as if he could never get enough of that clean warm air into his lungs. Shaking the water from the end of his nose, he opened his eyes. Then came another rush of water, and poor Cheeky was caught up again!

Down the furrow it swept him, tossing him this way and that, sometimes swinging him against dry earth, but never giving him time to get a foothold. On he went, choking and kicking, until at last he stopped in a tiny cove and dragged his limp little body out of danger.

As soon as he could catch his breath, he looked around. "Now I know," he gasped, "what Mother meant by a flood!"

He was dreadfully tired and he puffed, just as he had when he finished his race with Ring. He closed his eyes because they just wouldn't stay open.

"I'll lie still and rest," he thought, "for a few minutes. Then I'll see if I can find some way out of this flood."

But Cheeky didn't rest long—at least, not on the narrow ridge between furrows. He was roused very suddenly by the feeling of strong warm fingers closing about him, lifting him up, up, up!

"Hungry Hawk!" he gasped as he opened his eyes. He tried to kick, but his legs were limp. Moreover, the fingers were gentle, not like the terrible claws of a rough-legged hawk.

"Well, well, young fellow," said a voice so close to his ear that it sounded like thunder, "I thought I told you to move this morning."

The man who had spoken wiped Cheeky's muddy brown coat. "Now I think I'll just pop you into my pocket and take you home to Mary Ellen."

CHAPTER SIX

Cheeky lay quietly where he was placed. It wasn't, he decided, such a bad place, this warm dry pocket. He was getting warmer and dryer every minute. Indeed, he'd have felt right at home if the pocket hadn't kept lurching and bobbing about in such a disconcerting manner. He could hear the water splashing and sloshing far below as he was carried from place to place. Cheeky shivered at the sound and curled into a corner.

It seemed hours and hours before the boots carried him out of the mud and started to crunch across dry ground.

"Perhaps we're going to Rocky Hill," thought Cheeky. "I'd better be looking about."

He poked an inquiring nose this way and that. What—no door to this nest? He'd have to make a door; dig himself out as he had done the day his front porch was torn down by the shining claw.

He sniffed, turning round and round to find a place to begin. He tried to dig, but his claws got caught and he had a dreadful time before he could get them free. It was most astonishing! Cheeky had never had any experience with the material that surrounded him. No, neither had his mother nor any of his ancestors, so of course he didn't know what to do. He was getting downright angry and excited about it when suddenly the world stopped turning somersaults, and the big voice spoke again.

"Got a surprise for you, Mary Ellen! Cutest little rat you ever saw!"

Rat, indeed! It was lucky Cheeky didn't understand or he would certainly have resented that. He backed away from the groping fingers until he couldn't back any farther.

"Hi, young fellow, got you that time!" And Cheeky was lifted, fighting and scolding, into the light.

This way and that he squirmed, trying to get his teeth into something besides cloth; but the fingers had grasped him just behind his hard little jaws, and Cheeky soon decided he hadn't a chance.

He glared suspiciously at the strange creature before him. She was dancing first on one foot and then on the other, making strange gurgling noises.

"May I hold him?" crooned the child. "See, he isn't even trying to bite! He's tame already!"

Cheeky's brown eyes watched every move. He had never seen such a creature. He preferred to stay with the man who, while not exactly a friend, was at least not a stranger. Besides, Ring, the dog, was sniffing and whining beside her. Cheeky hadn't forgotten his race with Ring across the prairie in the Old Pasture.

"Take him carefully," warned the man. "Hold him right behind his jaws and in front of his hind legs so he can't bite or kick. He's very strong."

"Let me go," snapped Cheeky as he was placed in the child's hands. He twisted and struggled until he knew it was of no use.

"Poor little baby," soothed Mary Ellen. "He isn't a thieving rat at all, Daddy; he's an honest little prairie dog and he wouldn't steal anything."

Daddy laughed. "I'm willing to admit he is quite a respectable little fellow, but I'm afraid he would steal the corn I've planted in the Old Pasture."

Mary Ellen's fingers were exploring Cheeky's back, working around behind his ears and a queer thing was

"Take him carefully," warned the man

happening to the tired little fellow! The fingers weren't trying to kill or crush him; they were scratching, rubbing, working—giving him the most delicious sensation he had ever experienced! He stopped scolding and lay still. Why, he was even tempted to go to sleep!

"See, Daddy," murmured Mary Ellen, "he likes me already. I'll hold him while you fix a cage for him."

"Cheek-chuck," muttered the prairie dog sleepily, then his eyes closed. Some time later, he was aroused. The fingers were opening—he was going to be free! Quick as thought, he leaped away, but again something stopped him; something that looked as fragile as blades of interwoven grass and yet it hurt his nose when he bumped against it.

Again and again he tried, pushing and clawing in sudden panic. He had been so sure he was going to be free! But Cheeky was quick to learn, and he soon decided that the wire was stronger than he. Then he began to look about.

He found he was in quite a large cage with plenty of room to run around. The cage was enclosed on three sides, with wire across the front. In one corner he discovered a small box with a door just large enough to crawl through. He sniffed cautiously. It smelled like the man who had brought him. Still, the man had done him no hurt.

"Might as well go in," he decided. "Looks as if it might be a good place to hide until I can get away and go to Rocky Hill."

Cheeky was hungry—so very hungry that he couldn't rest, and in a very short time he was poking his nose out of his new home. There was nobody in sight, and he decided to look for food.

Ah, there it was, right in a corner of his cage! Here was

something that reminded him of the smell that used to tickle his nose back in the Old Pasture! It was a kind of grain, too, that Cheeky found very sweet and satisfying. He ate as fast as he could, not forgetting, however, to sit up straight and keep watch all the time he was stuffing oatmeal between his busy little jaws.

At a sound close by, he darted back to his bedroom. "Look, Mother," called the voice of Mary Ellen, "he has eaten every bit of the oatmeal and most of the alfalfa!"

"Good. I am sure you needn't worry about his being too timid to eat."

Mary Ellen laughed. "I'll be more apt to worry about the stomach ache he is going to have tonight."

As soon as he was sure they were gone, Cheeky crept back to the pile of alfalfa, where he ate and ate until his bulging sides could hold no more. Then he crawled back to his bedroom and slept like a top. His coat was dry, his nest warm and quiet. Once in the night he heard Ring barking close by, but he dreamed he was at home in the Old Pasture and he knew no dog could reach him there; so he just twitched his ears and went on dreaming.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Truly the great shining claw had turned Cheeky's world upside down. He was no longer free. He clawed and bit and tore at the wire in the front of his cage until at last he decided it couldn't be broken. Then he tried to gnaw through the wooden box but there wasn't a corner where he could get a start.

Every day Mary Ellen came to visit him and she did bring the most interesting things to eat—things Cheeky had never heard of from any of his ancestors back in the Old Pasture. The sound of her voice was pleasant, too. Indeed, her coming was the one bright spot in the long lonesome day, and he always greeted her with a joyful little "cheek-chuck!"

One day a hand came through the hole in the top of the cage. Cheeky darted into the farthest corner and tried to get to his bedroom but the reaching fingers barred his way.

"Go away!" he barked. "Go away, I say!"

"Now, Cheeky," Mary Ellen soothed, "you ought to know by this time that I wouldn't hurt you. Come, let me scratch your ears. Don't you remember?"

Cheeky flattened himself tensely against the wall of the cage. "If you try to catch me, I'll bite," he threatened.

Still the fingers came nearer; they touched his side, his neck, his ears—rubbing and scratching just as they had done the day he was caught.

Cheeky's angry barking quieted until it was nothing but a grumble. Soon it stopped entirely. Slowly he relaxed until at last he turned his head to show her where he liked best to be scratched—the place that he simply never could reach for himself. Her voice soothed him, just as his mother's gentle crooning had done, when he was a baby at home in his nest of dried grass. All the time the fingers were rubbing and pinching and pulling until Cheeky was tingling with delight.

At last he even let her reach under his chin to scratch

his throat—the place that every wild animal knows must be protected. He did try to scold at first, but that particular spot had never been scratched except by Cheeky's own hind foot, and fingers were much more satisfactory.

One day, Mary Ellen picked him up. Cheeky fought at first because he never could forget what his mother had told him about being picked up by Hungry Hawk. He crept cautiously about in the little girl's lap as she sat on the floor beside his cage.

"Perhaps it's my chance," he thought. "Perhaps I can get away at last."

He ran all about the woodshed; but the door was closed and the window too high. However, Cheeky wasn't going to be miserable about it. There were many interesting places to explore. In fact, Cheeky didn't believe in being miserable anyway.

After that, he was no longer kept in his cage. One day Mary Ellen came to the door and called. Cheeky stopped gnawing on the corner of Father's tool chest and with a happy little "cheek-chuck" came to meet her. She knelt down on the floor and Cheeky understood. Digging his sharp little claws into the cloth of her dress, he climbed straight up to her shoulder and cuddled down under her hair in the warm little place behind her ear.

"Scratch my chin," he ordered and he rubbed it against her shoulder so that she couldn't possibly misunderstand.

Mary Ellen paid no attention. Cheeky studied the situation. She was eating—and he wanted to eat, too. He always wanted to eat. Slipping down into her lap, he poked his greedy little nose under her hand.

"No Cheeky," she told him, "it's molasses taffy and you

wouldn't like that. Besides, Mother says you've been getting too much to eat lately—too much cake and raisins! You're terribly fat." She scratched his stomach. "Just see how your stomach sticks out. How could you hope to beat El Coyote in a race?"

Still Cheeky insisted. The smell of molasses taffy was delightful. Finally he nipped her finger to make her understand.

Mary Ellen laughed. "I'm sure you'll be sorry, Cheeky dear, and if you are, remember, I warned you."

She bit off a big piece and laid it before him. Without even a "thank you," he snatched it up and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Oh, Cheeky," gasped Mary Ellen, "that was too much for one bite! I hope you don't choke!"

Cheeky's teeth were long, his jaws very strong, and when he bit into that taffy, he bit hard. It was most surprising.

"Cheek, cheek, cheek," he stuttered in a muffled voice as he tried in vain to open his mouth wider and so pull the candy loose from his teeth.

Mary Ellen laughed. He did look funny with his impudent little mouth gummed shut for once. "Do let me help you," she begged.

Cheeky backed away, clawing at his mouth and shouting through his nose all the angry words he could think of. Twisting his head first to one side and then the other, he fought and raged until at last the candy worked loose. When it had finally melted from his teeth, he walked back to his corner behind the tool chest and nothing—not even the smell of raisins—could coax him to come out.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cheeky couldn't hold a grudge. He was quick-tempered and ready to quarrel with anybody, but his memory was short; and it's hard to stay angry under these conditions. By the time the sweet taste was gone from his mouth, he had forgotten all about molasses taffy.

Mary Ellen returned after lunch. Father came with her.

"Daddy," said the little girl as Cheeky came running to meet them, "do you think he'd run away if we let him out?"

"I think not," Father replied. "Prairie dogs seldom wander far from home. They know their enemies are always lurking about."

Mary Ellen considered. "Do you suppose Ring or Pussums would catch him, thinking he was a rat?"

Father laughed and reached his hand down to Cheeky. "This young fellow is so independent and short-tempered that I think he is quite capable of taking care of himself. "Let's see what Ring thinks of him."

He lifted the prairie dog into his arms and whistled. Cheeky's heart skipped a beat as Ring bounded into the shed. The dog sniffed inquiringly, then barked as if to say, "Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

Father put Cheeky down on the floor. Ring stiffened, started forward, then stopped so suddenly that he nearly tumbled on his nose. He had expected the prairie dog to dart away, as he had done in the Old Pasture, and Cheeky hadn't moved, except to sit up on his hind legs and stare.

Cheeky had grown since he came, and he was now as large as a half grown cat. He braced himself against his stumpy brown tail and called Ring all the unpleasant names he could remember.

Ring bounded clumsily around the little creature and barked excitedly.

"Go away," barked Cheeky in reply, always keeping his face toward the dog. "Go away, I tell you!"

At last Ring lay down, his head on his paws, and began to edge closer. Cheeky stopped scolding. Ring squirmed forward, inch by inch. Still Cheeky said nothing. Gaining courage, the dog pushed himself almost close enough to sniff Cheeky's blunt little nose. He had chased prairie dogs often but he had never managed to get close enough to feel really acquainted.

He whined nervously and lifted his nose. Suddenly the game ended. Cheeky, gaining courage from the dog's uncertainty, decided to take matters into his own hands. He gave one sharp little "cheek-chuck" that was positively startling in the tense stillness. Just as he barked, he leaped—straight at Ring's inquiring nose. Cheeky's claws were long and sharp.

Ring jumped back with a yelp of pain and surprise. Howling like a puppy, his tail between his legs, he dashed through the door and the sight of him was enough to make any prairie dog chuckle, which was precisely what Cheeky did.

Father was chuckling, too. "I think we needn't worry about that young fellow's taking care of himself." He walked out of the woodshed, leaving the door wide open.

Cheeky crept to the threshold, sat up and looked all around—at the tall cottonwoods, the tamarack hedge and the big house just in front of him. Some chickens were scratching in a corner of the yard. Cheeky had never seen them before.

"Not hawks," he decided, "they're much too small. I won't even notice them, unless I decide to chase them away."

He continued to look. Rocky Hill was nowhere in sight. Well, no matter! There was much to be seen right here. Cheeky jumped down the step and proceeded to investigate. He started across the yard, then stopped to look about. El Coyote was no where to be seen. Hungry Hawk was not in the sky. At last he went on, past the wood pile, and the pump, and clambered up the three steps to the back porch. Ring was lying beside the door, keeping very quiet. At Cheeky's approach, he got up and walked away as quickly as possible.

Cheeky, however, wasn't looking for trouble. He never did. He just wanted to investigate his new surroundings. Back down the steps he went. In front of the house, he found the most beautiful patch of luscious green grass. Um-m, it was fun to pluck it from the roots and sit up in the bright sunshine to eat.

"Better than Rocky Hill," he chattered to himself. "I'll make my home right here."

Mary Ellen knelt down beside him. "Come, Cheeky, aren't you about ready to come home?"

Cheeky was excited. "Let me alone," he snapped, and slipped away from her with surprising quickness.

He wandered about until he was tired, and then decided to look for a place to rest. The sunshine was delightful, and Cheeky loved to run about in it, but no intelligent prairie dog would think of lying down to sleep, except under cover.

On the side of the front porch, he spied a hole where a board had been removed.

"Looks cool and dark," he thought, "I'll just go in and take a nap."

But once he got in, the hole was surprisingly large. It would never do to go to sleep without making sure it was safe. El Coyote might be lurking in just such a place.

Suddenly something moved. A strange, black creature, the like of which Cheeky had never seen before, rose to her feet and faced him. It was Pussums, the big black cat, that kept the rats and mice away!

She crouched, her yellow eyes gleaming. Cheeky pretended to take no notice of her.

The cat crept nearer, and Cheeky decided that everything was not as it should be. She was, he knew, a much more dangerous foe than Ring, for in her eyes was the glare of the killer. Cheeky's sharp little tongue was silent and when he didn't scold, the situation was indeed serious! He sat up and waited, his bright eyes watching every move.

Pussums was coming closer, crouching so low that the

silky black of her stomach dragged on the ground. Her yellow eyes glowed, her tail switched from side to side.

Still Cheeky didn't move. Pussums patted the ground with her hind feet as she gathered herself for the spring. Suddenly she stopped. There was something queer about a rat that didn't try to get away—a rat that just sat up and watched. She flicked a silky black ear and hesitated.

Cheeky was quick to sense the fact that Pussums was just the least bit uncertain. He wasn't just being foolhardy when he sat up and waited instead of running away. He was wise with the wisdom of all of his ancestors. He knew he had very short legs and he knew Pussums could run much faster than he. Truest of all, he knew that when there is no chance to escape, it is much better to meet danger face to face, than to have it catch up with you when your back is turned. He had waited for this very minute.

Pussum's eyes wavered; instantly into Cheeky's there flashed a joyous, angry light. Everything was still. In that moment, Cheeky barked—a short, sharp challenge. There was a flash of brown, faster than the eye could follow.

For an instant, the cat was too surprised to move. It was enough. Cheeky's sharp little claws reached her soft pink nose. There was an ear-splitting yowl—a hiss and a streak of black! Pussums leaped back, flashed past Cheeky, raced across the lawn, never stopping until she was safe in the branches of the old cottonwood.

Cheeky chuckled in great contentment; he looked about to make sure there were no more cats under the porch, smoothed his stiff brown fur, and curled up in a corner to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

Cheeky was lonesome. He missed his friends of Dog Town. He was a full-grown prairie dog now, much larger than others of his kind, for he had been fed most generously. Of course, he loved Mary Ellen for all the nice things she did to make him happy; but that empty feeling in his heart kept coming back to torment him, no matter how many raisins he ate.

He loved to tease poor old Ring and he enjoyed sneaking up behind Pussums as she took her morning nap on the back porch. His sharp little "cheek-chuck" always sent her into the air, tail bristling and ears laid back.

Still, Cheeky was lonesome for somebody who could speak his own language. One day he got into the house and decided it was much better than the woodshed. Mary Ellen's mother didn't seem pleased.

"I can't have that noisy little creature in the house," she said. "Do take him out, Mary Ellen."

The little girl took him to the door and placed him outside. For a moment, Cheeky didn't understand; then he stood up and peered through the screen.

"Let me in," he shouted. "Come and open the door!"

Nobody came. He shouted again. Then he dug his claws into the screen and climbed to the very top. There he hung, scolding and chattering until Mother called Mary Ellen.

The little girl sat down on the porch step. "Why Cheeky," she said, "how you do talk! Come here and see what I have in my pocket."

Cheeky worked his way down from the screen but he was still provoked. "You didn't let me in," he grumbled as he clambered into her lap.

Then he smelled something and his grievance was forgotten. Munching part of a cookie, he was carried to the garden and left alone before he had time to realize that Mary Ellen had played a trick on him. The matter wasn't settled yet.

Indeed, it wasn't settled until Mother, realizing that a little noise was easier to bear than a lot, was influenced by his scolding, and allowed him to come and go as he pleased. Mary Ellen always carried him out to the woodshed at bedtime, however, and Cheeky knew as well as she when it was nine o'clock. He would kick and squirm and try to get out of her hands.

One evening, he decided not to go. For an hour he had played or lain in Mary Ellen's lap. When Father got up to wind the clock, Cheeky was nowhere to be seen. The little

girl called, but there was no answer. The prairie dog had made up his mind that a lonely woodshed was no place to spend the night. Of course he heard Mary Ellen calling and hunting, but he knew what she wanted, and he knew what he wanted, too. Even when she moved the couch and found him, he kept perfectly still until she touched him.

"Go away," he snapped; "can't you see I'm sleeping?"

The little girl caught him expertly behind the ears for she knew that when Cheeky was in this mood, he would probably do more than scold.

"You won't find me tomorrow," he threatened as Mary Ellen carried him out of the house. "I'll hide in a different place."

So the game started. Every night he would disappear, just as Father was winding the clock. Every night he chose a different hiding place, and every night Mary Ellen dragged him out.

One evening, there were guests. Cheeky had a glorious time! At last he grew tired and wandered away into the darkened bedroom to rest. Mother had turned the blankets down, ready for Mary Ellen. At the foot of the bed they hung close to the floor, and Cheeky clawed his way up.

He clambered about over the bed and poked his nose under the lifted blanket. Not a hole, exactly, but why couldn't one make a bedroom out of it?

He pushed in farther. He found it warm and cozy—much better than his own pile of straw in the woodshed. On he crept, feeling all the time more pleased with himself. "I'll just settle down here for the night," he decided. "She can never find me here."

That was a very satisfying thought, for it was raining hard and the sound of water running down the gutter pipes always reminded Cheeky of the flood. He wanted to shut out that sound.

He didn't hear Mary Ellen call that night. The truth of the matter was, she forgot. That is to say, she forgot until she pushed her cold toes down between blankets that were surprisingly warm; pushed until she felt something that moved. Then she realized she would have to be careful where she put her feet.

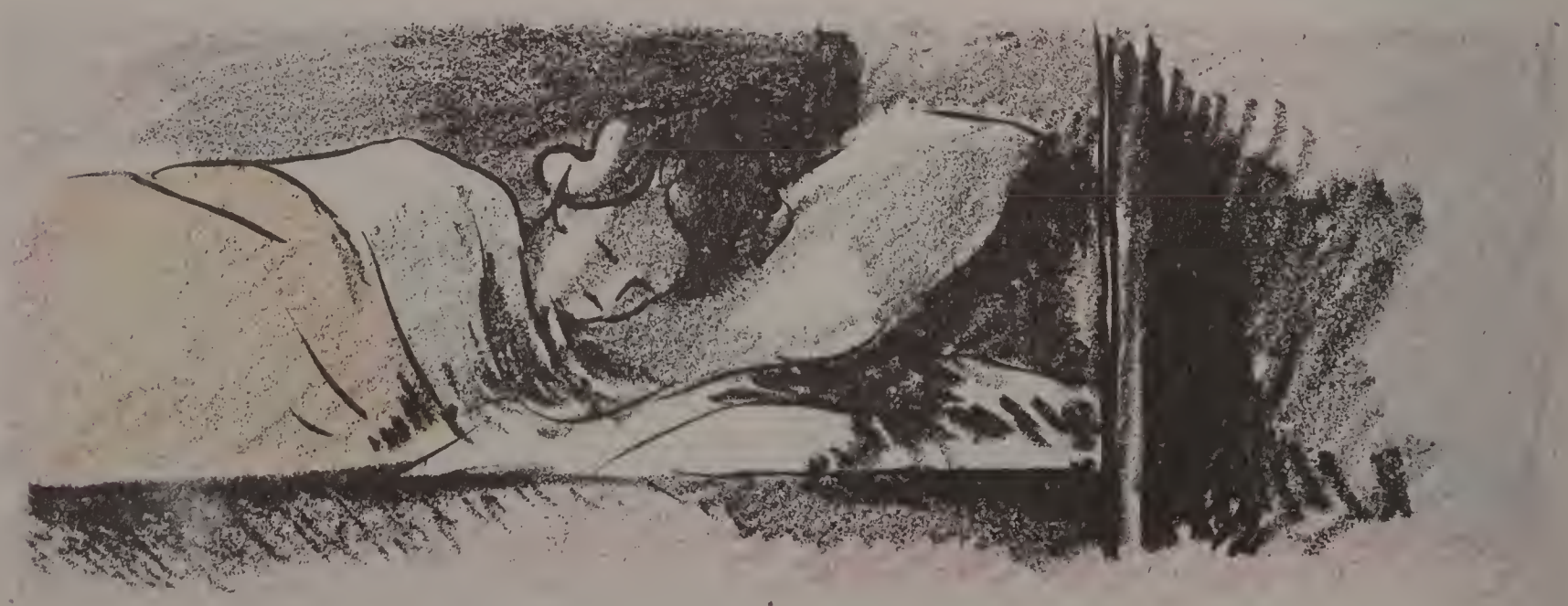
"Cheeky," she gasped and sat up again. "Cheeky, how ever did you get in here?"

Cheeky made no reply. She hadn't found him with her hands, so perhaps she hadn't found him at all. He would just go back to sleep.

The little girl considered. "I'll have to get up and take him out," she thought to herself.

She listened to the rain against the window and shivered. "Poor little fellow! He does hate to hear it rain!"

Cheeky settled himself more comfortably. Mary Ellen slipped back against her pillow. In a minute they were both sound asleep.



CHAPTER TEN

Rhodie, the big Rhode Island Red hen, had stolen her nest. That doesn't mean she had taken something that didn't belong to her. It means that she had made a nest under the plum bushes or far back in the straw stack where she was sure Mary Ellen wouldn't think to look for it. Every day she would come from behind the hedge, cackling importantly about her secret. Finally she disappeared and everybody forgot about her.

One day, just three weeks later, she came clucking into the yard with a brand new family, a dozen little golden yellow chicks, that toddled clumsily after their mother, keeping up a constant chorus of cheeping.

Rhodie was twice her natural size, for her feathers were all fluffed out and her wings were down as she tried to watch in every direction at once.

Cheeky saw Rhodie and her new family first. He was sitting on the lowest step of the back porch, dreaming of the games he used to play with his friends back in the Old Pasture.

Hens—he had never cared for them! In fact, he often ran at them just to hear the silly racket they made. They were stupid and cowardly. But this new family—well, it might prove interesting.

Cheeky dropped to the ground and approached. Rhodie saw him and called her babies under her wings. He sat up and waited. Of course Rhodie forgot all about him, just as he had expected her to do. Hens were so silly. When the chickens ventured out again, Cheeky crept closer. Rhodie saw him and cackled a bit; but, after all, she had seen him many times in the barnyard.

Suddenly the prairie dog had a bright idea. "At last," he thought, "I have found somebody to play with!"

He ran up behind the nearest chick, poked his nose under its plump little body and lifted. Down went the chicken on its back in the dust!

"Cheeup, cheeup, cheeup," it cried.

Rhodie came running, furious and threatening, as the chicken regained its feet. Cheeky sat up and watched,

fairly chuckling with delight. Of course Rhodie didn't blame him; she was too stupid.

When the excitement had passed, he tried it again. Down went the chick and by the time his excited mother arrived, Cheeky was sitting just as she had seen him last —an innocent bystander. It was the most fun he had had since the shining claw tore up his home in the Old Pasture.

Finally, however, he began to grow careless. He grew more and more careless, in fact, until at last he was running from one chicken to another, upsetting them faster than they could right themselves. It made a terrible racket—chickens cheeping and Rhodie clucking and cackling and rushing, first one way and then another. Suddenly Rhodie realized what it was all about.

The game changed. For one astonished moment, Cheeky couldn't imagine what was happening. It was just as if Hungry Hawk had tumbled out of a perfectly empty sky. He was fairly smothered in feathers and dust. Rhodie's sharp beak came down on his fat little back—bang, bang, bang!

He tried to kick, to bite—but there was nothing to fight but feathers! Feathers got into his mouth and nose and nearly choked him; while all the time Rhodie's beak rained a perfect hail storm of blows!

It wasn't a fair fight, certainly not! Rhodie had given him no warning. How was he to know that chickens didn't like to play games?

It couldn't last long. Cheeky finally managed to scramble away. Through the yard he ran, up the steps, across the porch, never stopping until he had climbed to the top of the screen.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cheeky was more lonesome than ever. He dared not play in the chicken yard any more. Pussums always arched her back and made terrible noises whenever he came near. He tried to make friends with Ring as soon as he was sure that the good-natured old dog was not like his cousin, El Coyote.

At first Ring didn't trust him and the hair on his neck bristled when Cheeky tried to play. Then gradually he became accustomed to the prairie dog and paid no attention to him. But they could never become close friends. Cheeky's temper was too short. When the game became a bit too rough, he would rush at Ring, scolding furiously. Ring, remembering his first meeting, would lick his scarred nose and run away.

Ring would lick his scarred nose and run away

Cheeky's temper didn't improve as he grew older. Perhaps that was because he was lonesome or perhaps it was because he ate too much.

One morning, for no reason that he could see, Mary Ellen carried him to the woodshed. She cuddled him under her chin as she took him to his prison.

"I'm sorry, Cheeky dear," she murmured against his fat little neck, "you know you are such a nuisance. Great-aunt Mary Ellen is a very important person, and she is coming to visit. She doesn't know anything about prairie dogs, and I'm sure she wouldn't like you."

She placed him on the floor and closed the door against his outraged protests.

"Open the door," he shouted. "It isn't bedtime! I won't stay in this shed!"

When he was very sure she had gone away, Cheeky stopped scolding. There was nothing to do, nothing to eat. He thought about his friends on Rocky Hill. They were free. Sometimes, in the night, when he heard El Coyote howling close by, he was glad he was safe in the woodshed.

Hungry Hawk never came very near to the house. That was a blessing, certainly. Still, it wasn't the natural way for a prairie dog to live. Danger was part of life and he missed that, too.

Sometimes, when the wind blew from the west, he caught the faint sharp fragrance of sage and his heart ached with longing. He would have welcomed a short race with El Coyote and the thrill that came when he kicked his heels together and plunged to safety through the front door of his own home.

His eyes closed. What was the use of staying awake?

He wanted somebody to talk to; most of all, he wanted to talk to somebody who spoke his own language.

He dozed all morning because there was nothing to wake up for. Then suddenly there was! The door opened. Father came in. Cheeky greeted him joyously.

"Well, young fellow, somebody must have shut you in here by mistake! Want to come out?"

Did he want to come out! He "cheek-chucked" triumphantly as he clambered over the sill, then hurried around the house to that luscious patch of green grass in the front yard.

A big, shiny car was just turning into the driveway. Cheeky sat up and watched. He had never seen anything so large that moved. This was something that was entirely too big to be scolded; but so long as it didn't chase him, he would be safe in watching it, especially if he sat close to the hole under the front porch.

Mary Ellen came running out of the house. A man in a gray cap was helping Great-aunt Mary Ellen out of the car. She wore a rustling black dress. Her mouth was very stiff as if it had been starched.

She kissed Mary Ellen. The little girl hoped she was well. The old lady smiled—a very starchy smile—and thanked her. Together they walked toward the house. Cheeky followed without a sound. Mary Ellen opened the door for the old lady to enter. Without a sound Cheeky, close against the folds of the long black dress, slipped through the door and under the couch without anybody's knowing he was there.

"Much easier than climbing up on the screen door and shouting myself hoarse," he chuckled; "or gnawing on the corner until somebody decides to let me in."

He sniffed the warm fragrant air from the kitchen, heavy with sugar and spice—things that Cheeky dearly loved. There was much talking and walking back and forth from kitchen to dining room.

"I'll wait until everybody sits down," Cheeky decided. "Mary Ellen will give me dessert under the table."

He hadn't long to wait. Father came in, and Mary Ellen led the old lady to her chair. Cheeky followed close behind that long black skirt. He hadn't been invited, but he knew he was expected because he always came.

He sat down to wait. People always ate first the things that Cheeky didn't like. His turn came with dessert—things made with sugar and fruit.

At last he began to grow impatient. They were having his favorite fruit cake. Cheeky could smell it. Mary Ellen had dropped a few crumbs, not nearly as many as she usually did. Great-aunt Mary Ellen had some in her lap. Cheeky saw them fall.

"I won't wait any longer," he decided. "I'll climb up into her lap and help myself. I'll surprise her."

His claws made a scratchy sound against the heavy silk. Great-aunt Mary Ellen stirred and lifted her napkin. She certainly was surprised! She took one look at Cheeky's bright little eyes, shoved her chair back from the table, lifted her hands high above her head, and screamed!

Cheeky poked his nose back under the napkin and listened serenely to shriek after shriek. For all he knew she might be singing. When the crumbs were finished, he pushed the napkin to one side and climbed swiftly up her waist, intent on reaching the cozy place under her ear.

"Scratch my chin," he barked, trying to make himself heard above the uproar. "Scratch my chin, I say!"

Then, just as Cheeky poked his impudent little nose under the old lady's back hair, Mary Ellen caught him. Snatching him from the quivering black silk shoulder, she carried him out of the house, straight to the woodshed. There she dropped him most urgently, and went out and slammed the door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cheeky was too surprised to speak. Mary Ellen had never treated him roughly before. By the time he had made up his mind to scold, he knew she was back in the house, and he might as well save his breath.

He could hear the excitement, for everybody was talking at once, Great-aunt Mary Ellen's voice loudest of all. Then out to the car they went, and it drove away much faster than it had come.

It seemed hours and hours before Mary Ellen came back. She didn't call, she didn't even answer when he greeted her. She just picked him up and her face was stained with recent tears.

"She won't come back so long as you're here, Cheeky," the little girl whispered. "She told me so herself. And she may not invite me to visit her in the city next summer. Oh, Cheeky, didn't I tell you she was a very important person?"

Cheeky crept up to her shoulder.

Mary Ellen continued, "She was terribly upset. I never saw her so angry before. I never dreamed she could scream so—so ear-splittingly!"

Cheeky rubbed his nose against her neck, just as he had done to Great-aunt Mary Ellen and all at once the little girl giggled. "You didn't really hurt her, Cheeky dear. I'll n-never forget how funny she looked."

That was all. Cheeky forgave her when he found she had brought a whole pocketful of fruit cake. She held him in her lap while he ate; then she carried him through the yard and out of the back gate. On and on she walked, until at last they came to a field of waving green corn. Cheeky would never have dreamed it was the Old Pasture.

As they walked across it, Mary Ellen spoke again. "They say you must go away, Cheeky dear. You've been a cunning pet, but they aren't thinking about that now. They're just remembering all the trouble you've caused. So—I'm afraid you'll have to go."

Cheeky looked about. They had left the corn field and were climbing a hill—a low rocky hill!

From behind a big cactus, sounded a familiar voice. "Cheek-chuck! Go away! Stay on your own side of the fence!"

The little girl sat down on somebody's front porch. "Good-by, Cheeky," she whispered against his rough brown

neck. "I—I hope you won't be too homesick. I'll come every day and bring you raisins and cookies."

Cheeky sniffed the wild sweet fragrance of sage in bloom.

He wasn't listening. He had become wildly excited at the sound of that other voice, so like his own.

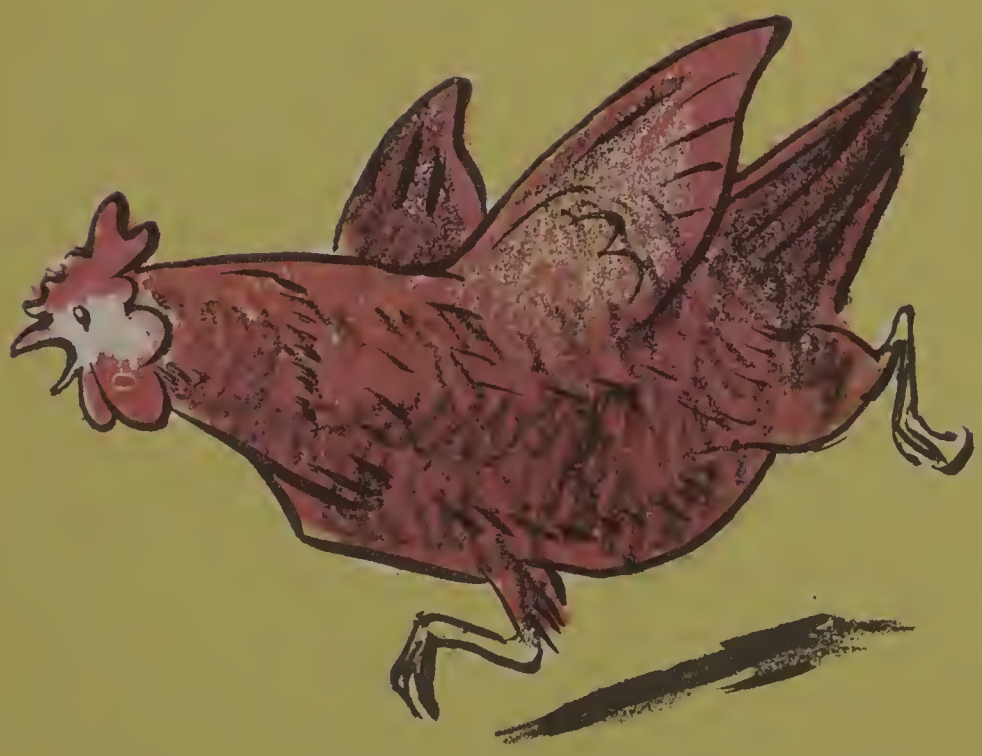
"Let me go," he chattered as he twisted himself out of her hands.

He ran a short distance, then sat up and looked around. "Cheek-chuck," he barked, but not in answer to Mary Ellen.

He sat up and looked around

The little girl laughed. "Why, Cheeky, I don't believe you're going to be lonesome at all! You're glad to be here! And you know so much and you're so much larger than all the rest of your friends, I have no doubt that by this time tomorrow you'll be mayor of Dog Town!"

Mary Ellen was forgotten. Perhaps, when Cheeky grew tired of buffalo grass, he would remember the raisins and fruit cake. Perhaps, when El Coyote was howling on the top of the hill, he would long for his snug little bed in the woodshed. But he wasn't remembering now. He had come home—home at last to Rocky Hill.



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